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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 001427

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2015

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SUBJECT: NOTHING MAJOR FROM JACK STRAW'S NEW DELHI VISIT

Classified By: Acting DCM Geoffrey Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's February 16-18 visit to India yielded "nothing major," according to the UK High Commission, and was distinctly low key compared to earlier stops in Kabul and Islamabad. Straw signed two immigration/law enforcement agreements, and discussed Indo-Pak, Nepal, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iran, UNSC reform and the July G-8 Summit. Surprisingly, Straw did not raise Iraq. The timing of his visit, in advance of expected elections in the UK later this year, led to speculation that he may have had his own constituency in mind as much as UK-India relations. End Summary.

12. (C) Reviewing the visit, UK High Commission Poloff told us February 23 that Straw seems to have viewed his New Delhi stop as something of a break after demanding visits in Kabul and Islamabad. UK PolCouns agreed that New Delhi was a low-intensity breather after more substantial visits earlier in the trip. Straw several times reminded audiences that he had honeymooned in India, and was clearly more at ease with his Indian interlocutors than he had been at previous stops, according to our High Commission contacts.

13. (C) During his New Delhi visit, Straw met with External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh, National Security Advisor M. K. Narayanan, Home Minister Shivraj Patil, and BJP leaders Yashwant Sinha and L. K. Advani. The latter meeting was intended in particular to defuse BJP criticism of the breakthrough Indo-Pak agreement for bus service in Kashmir. UK Poloff remarked that both the GOI and opposition figures were largely in harmony on the Indian policies toward Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

14. (C) One area of substance during Straw's visit was the agreement signed for prisoner transfers between the two nations, and the renewal of a memorandum of understanding on the return of illegitimate asylum seekers to India. The slow documentation of Indian nationals prior to repatriation has been an irritant, and the February agreement renewed an MOU signed during Home Minister David Blunkett's 2004 visit. Although the agreements garnered positive press coverage, UK PolCouns hinted that they were aimed mainly at addressing anti-immigrant sentiment in Britain during election season, and would have little practical impact since implementation problems persist.

Indo-Pak Relationship and Kashmir

15. (C) Straw congratulated Foreign Minister Singh on the progress in relations between India and Pakistan. UK Poloff commented that the Straw visit came at a good time in Indo-Pak relationships, with little substantive discussion other than expressions of encouragement at the positive direction of confidence-building measures. BJP former Foreign Minister Sinha was predictably critical of recent GOI policies, pointing out the potential for infiltration of militants into Indian Kashmir through the recently announced Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service. The High Commission reported that Straw found the general agreement with GOI policy among opposition politicians to be encouraging. During discussions with Straw on Kashmir, Home Minister Patil gave "the answer you'd expect," namely that India was ready to hold talks with anybody. Straw encouraged Patil to restart the dialogue with the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference, and also raised the subject of human rights in Kashmir. Patil's response, according to the High Commission, was that human rights violations are down in Kashmir, and there are appropriate state and national human rights commissions to look into violations. NSA Narayanan lobbied Straw to alter the Foreign Office's travel advisory to UK citizens warning them against travel to Jammu and Kashmir, and Straw agreed to look into that issue.

Nepal - Consultations, but how much coordination?

16. (C) The High Commission told us that both the UK and Indian side were interested in discussing the situation in Nepal, although the FCO did not want to heighten pressure on Kathmandu at this stage. Straw and Singh agreed in their analysis of what had happened in Nepal, but they did not get into detail of what will come next. UK Poloff told us that her impression of the discussion was that India is hoping

that its levers (for example, suspension of military aid) will have a quick effect. However, our High Commission contacts were not convinced that India knows what it will do if the King does not respond to these levers. Foreign Minister Singh appeared to be very keen on maintaining consultations with the UK on Nepal.

Afghanistan and Iran

17. (C) Arriving in New Delhi after Kabul, Straw offered thanks to India for its assistance to the government of Afghanistan. The High Commission noted that Singh had responded positively to Straw's encouragement that India assist Afghanistan in the area of counter-narcotics, but pointed out that the UK had attempted to engage the GOI in counter-narcotics before, and had discovered that while in principle the MEA may favor attempts to combat the narcotics trade, in practice "they aren't going anywhere." When the conversation turned to Iran, Straw emphasized that India must push Tehran to cooperate with the EU-3 on its nuclear programs. The Indian officials' response to Straw's exhortation was that they have given the message to Iran that Iran should cooperate in the talks with the EU-3 and IAEA. The High Commission stated that the UK feels that India has so far been helpful on the Iran matter.

More consultations on Bangladesh

18. (C) The British reported that Singh was very keen to discuss Bangladesh with Straw, and noted that India gave a presentation on the "terrorist threat" coming from Bangladesh. Straw made the point to Singh that the stability of the political system of Bangladesh is a wider issue than cross-border terrorism alone. Singh and Straw agreed to consult further on issues involving Bangladesh.

India pushes its positions on international organizations

19. (C) Singh confirmed to Straw that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will attend the July G-8 Summit at Gleneagles. Indian interlocutors pushed the GOI's desire for a permanent seat on the UNSC, and Jack Straw's blunt answer at a press conference that India needed to recognize the realistic options for UNSC reform ruffled local feathers. However, our UK contacts noted that Straw's remarks did not get the same outraged press coverage that attended Vladimir Putin's similar remarks in December.

10. (C) British officers in New Delhi were disappointed that Straw did not engage Indian interlocutors on Iraq.

Comment

11. (C) Unlike Straw's earlier visits, several of which came in the white heat of Indo-Pak crisis diplomacy, this trip had the feeling of a valedictory tour. Predictably, there was much speculation here that domestic UK politics were driving Straw's visit (he told a TV interviewer that his constituency includes over 45,000 persons of South Asian descent). That impression was reinforced by the Foreign Secretary's extensive tour of Indian Punjab. His comments during the visit illustrated again how important South Asia is in his consciousness, and in public remarks he several times referred to his 2002 crisis diplomacy with Secretary Powell. Aside from the consular-related agreements, there were no deliverables, but Straw's discussions with senior GOI officials on regional and global foreign policy issues illustrate how the UK-GOI "strategic dialogue" is intensifying.

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